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Delivering Excellence and Equity in Scottish Education - A Delivery Plan for Scotland

Deputy First Minister, John Swinney
Statement to Parliament
28 June, 2016

This week is the last week of term for many schools across Scotland. It is the end of another year of hard work for teachers, parents, children and young people and the start of a new journey for those young people as they embark on the next stage of their lives.

And, today marks the start of a new journey for Scottish Education - a journey that will ensure we realise our ambition for excellence and equity for every child and young person in Scotland.

In its review of Scottish education, the OECD found that achievement in Scottish schools is above the international average in reading and science; that attainment is improving; that Scotland's schools are inclusive; that our children are resilient and have positive attitudes towards school.

These are strong foundations for Scottish education. They are testament to the bold reform of Curriculum for Excellence and the energy applied by many to ensure success for Scotland's young people.

The OECD also advised us to continue to be bold. Andy Hargreaves of the OECD Review team set out the challenge at the Education Summit for us "not only to remain ahead of the global curve in education but actually become the curve that others will refer to around the world".

He urged us to move from a "culture of judgement" to a "system of judgement" that delivers for every child and young person across our country.

We must ensure that every child no matter where they are from or how well off their family is has the same opportunities and an equal chance to succeed.

Presiding officer, I am pleased to share a tangible and deliverable plan for delivering excellence and equity in Scottish education with Parliament today. The Plan covers three themes.

The first and overriding theme is our shared commitment right across Scottish education – from early learning and childcare, through school and in our colleges and universities - to close the attainment gap between children from the most and least deprived backgrounds. The Government will be relentless in our efforts to make this happen.

For most children, our system already delivers – our young people achieved record exam passes last year and only last week, yet again, statistics showed a new record in the percentage of young people leaving school for positive destinations. These same statistics also showed that we continue to make progress in narrowing the gap in attainment.

But narrowing is not the same as closing. And good is not the same as great. Presiding Officer, closing the attainment gap is not a choice but an imperative to creating a fairer and smarter Scotland.

We will start with our programme to transform children's early education and ensure it links cohesively with when children start school.

The focus on literacy in P1 to P3 will be designed to close the vocabulary gap and from September this year, school inspection and self-evaluation will focus more directly on progress to close the gap. From the new school year, funding for the Challenge Authorities and Schools will double to £50 million and extend to secondary schools.

And we will work with these schools and communities to develop and implement programmes and activity to enable and encourage families' involvement in learning. We will encourage action in all schools through the increased investment announced today in the Innovation Fund, and from 2017-18, through an additional £100 million that will be allocated directly to schools.

In order to focus our efforts on closing the gap, we must first of all be able to identify precisely where that gap is.

We will use the new data that will become available through the National Improvement Framework to identify the attainment gap in P1, P4, P7 and S3 and at school and local authority level – and agree targets to reduce this.

We will focus our collective efforts where they are needed most. And school inspection will focus more directly on closing that gap.

The second theme is the need to ensure our curriculum, applauded by the OECD, can be delivered so that our teachers are free to teach and that our children have the opportunity to learn.

We will put in place clear, simple statements that give teachers confidence about what CfE does, and does not, expect of them. We will de-clutter the curriculum and will strip away anything that creates unnecessary workload for teachers and learners.

I have instructed Education Scotland to prepare and publish a clear and concise statement of the basic framework within which teachers teach. This will be published in time for the new school session in August.

Also by August, Education Scotland will provide clear, practical advice on assessing achievement in literacy and numeracy – making clear the expected benchmarks for literacy and numeracy, for each level of Curriculum for Excellence.

By the end of the year, Education Scotland will provide similar advice on the achievement of curriculum levels in every curriculum area across the Broad General Education. This will allow teachers to make sure their learners are on track, and are developing the range of skills they should.

We will also significantly streamline the current range of guidance and related material on CfE and by January next year a new much simpler set of key resources will be available on the new National Improvement Hub.

We will carefully consider the ideas contributed by teacher associations and other partners in education, and take forward a new programme of reducing workload in schools. I will directly oversee this activity and will test these proposals' effectiveness with a panel of teachers to ensure that their voice and experience informs what we take forward.

I have instructed HM Inspectors to carry out a focused review of the demands placed on schools by each local authority in relation to Curriculum for Excellence and will receive their recommendations by mid-September.

The SQA, Education Scotland, schools and local authorities must deliver the commitments made in the first report of the Assessment and National Qualifications Group.

The SQA will also be expected to deliver the actions to simplify and streamline qualifications set out in the 51 'subject reports' and consult on how best to streamline its course documentation for the national qualifications. I will meet the Chief Examiner for Scotland on a monthly basis to ensure SQA is delivering.

We will also reconvene the Assessment and National Qualifications Group, which I will Chair, to further explore what more could be done to reduce workload associated with assessment and the new qualifications, as quickly as possible.

This work to de-clutter CfE is key to freeing up teachers' time to deliver the broad general education at the heart of our curriculum in a way which enables all children to benefit and succeed.

The third theme is that we must create the right structures to encourage and enable everyone to participate fully in school life - children and young people, parents, teachers and communities. Doing so represents the biggest opportunity to improve the outcomes and life chances of all our children and young people

In September I will launch a review of governance alongside the Programme for Government. It will explore all options and avenues to ensure we create the right balance of autonomy and accountability in our education system. It will consider the changes needed to education to empower our teachers and schools, seek to devolve decision making and funding to schools and communities and support the development of school clusters and new educational regions.

At the same time, we will develop proposals for a fair and transparent national funding formula to ensure that resources go where they are needed most.

Schools are the building blocks of our education system but that is not reflected in our legislation, with responsibility for delivery and raising standards currently resting mainly with education authorities. We will introduce an Education Bill in the second year of this Parliament to address this issue.

Delivery of each of these themes requires leadership at all levels and by all involved in Scottish education. Teachers are key to our ambitions and investing in their skills, knowledge and indeed, confidence will create the right culture of empowered leadership. So we will invest £1.5 million over the next 3 years to support up to 160 aspiring headteachers every year to benefit from the "Into Headship" programme and nearly £1 million this year in Masters level learning for teachers.

We also need the right people with the right skills in the right places at the right time. So we will ensure new teachers start their career confident in their ability to raise attainment in literacy and numeracy as well as nurture children's health and wellbeing; we will expand distance learning initial teacher education models; develop a Scottish Masters programme that focuses on the vital transition phase between primary and secondary. And we will introduce a new route to encourage the highest quality graduates into priority areas and subjects.

Conclusion

This Delivery Plan sets out the actions this Government will take over the course of this parliament to free up teachers to teach and empower our schools to deliver excellence and equity for all. The reforms that we plan are substantial and our ambition is clear. We will deliver on the basis of evidence while also being unafraid to

innovate and find our own solutions.

We will invest and seek to transform our education system. And at every step, we will engage – building on the Education Summit which brought together key partners to share ideas for change by establishing a Teachers Panel and an International Council of Education Advisers.

Presiding Officer, closing the attainment gap and raising standards for all – delivering excellence and equity for all of our children and young people - must now be our shared national endeavour. This plan is focused on doing exactly that.

ENDS